

HIGH FARCE OF BUMBLING BIRDMEN

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Length: 755 words**Byline:** HANSEN P**Body**

PETER HANSEN]TOWNSVILLE pilot **David John Cutmore** had to relive in court one of his most horrifying moments in his short career as a smuggler of rare birds.

He was in a rented light plane close to Lord Howe Island on a hair-raising trip to New Zealand with an illegal cargo of galahs and other endangered Australian birds. An associate back in Brisbane, with questionable mechanical skills, had taken out four of the aircraft's six seats to fit long-range fuel tanks. **Cutmore** assumed his mate knew what he was doing.
QNP

Near Lord Howe, **Cutmore** turned the switch on the reserve tanks.

Somehow the system was working in reverse and instead of the fuel going to the engines, it began flooding the other way.

"The fuel was pouring into the cabin," he said.

"I had to turn back. I couldn't land at Lord Howe because of what I was carrying . . . we would have been caught with a planeload of birds."

He made it back to Wondai aerodrome where he had taken off and he and the rest of the panicky gang dumped the birds, still in their cages, in the bush.

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They put back the aircraft seats, cleaned up the plane and returned it to the hirer who was none the wiser.

That was just one of a comedy of errors related at the trial of prominent Queensland bird dealer Dallas Albert Hill who pleaded not guilty to two federal charges of knowingly being involved in the illegal export of protected birds including galahs and Major Mitchell and Gang Gang cockatoos between March and September, 1993.

A Brisbane District Court jury convicted him a fortnight ago and Judge White sentenced him to 18 months jail.

The judge recommended he be released after six months on a \$5000 good behaviour bond.

Cutmore's bird smuggling career was haunted with bad experiences. Life became so hard he gave himself up after being on the run for two weeks in New Zealand.

He served a jail sentence in New Zealand and dodged another one when he returned to Australia by agreeing to give evidence for the Crown at the trial of Hill.

Cutmore, of Mundingburra, Townsville, a former instructor at Townsville aerodrome, said he was approached early in 1993 while unemployed and offered \$10,000 to fly wildlife to New Zealand.

The initial contact was not Hill. He knew it was illegal.

Others in the scheme paid for him to get endorsed on aircraft they intended to use to fly the birds on the nine-hour trip to New Zealand's North Island.

On the first attempt, they hired a Baron 58 from an Archerfield firm and flew it to Caboolture for preparations and fitting of fuel tanks (without the hirer's knowledge.)

The birds duly arrived in a van and the wire cages were loaded. He and another man took off and 10 minutes into the flight a passenger side door burst open and they had to return to Caboolture.

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On the second attempt, the plane's navigation system packed up over Moreton Island and again they had to return.

To avoid being sprung with a planeload of birds this time, he had to fly around in a training area waiting for a signal from the ground _ the opening of the hangar doors.

Contact between aircraft and the ground was by mobile phone.

After the plane landed, a van spirited the birds away and the plane was refitted with the seats and returned to the hirer.

Finally, with another aircraft, they succeeded in flying a load of birds to New Zealand where they were off-loaded.

Cutmore returned to Wondai with a couple of boxes of birds that looked like ducks.

By this time, Hill who had stayed in the background, became known to him as a man named Jim who had a business in New Farm and had a property with bird breeding facilities at Woodford.

In September in 1993, they attempted another export of birds in another hired plane. The trip went well and the birds were offloaded at Matamata airport in New Zealand.

They were refuelling to come home when he noticed someone spying on them, taking notes. He ran from the airport, leaving the plane.

After two weeks he gave himself up.

In Auckland Court in October 1993, he pleaded guilty to trading in threatened wildlife species, importing animals, flying a non-scheduled flight to New Zealand and being the pilot of an aircraft not attended by Customs. He was jailed for nine months and served half that sentence.

Back in Australia he pleaded guilty to two counts of exporting prohibited birds but was given a six-month suspended sentence because he cooperated with the authorities.

Sending Hill to jail, Judge White said his counsel's pleas for

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leniency fell on deaf ears in a case where he showed no remorse and did everything possible to avoid conviction.