



President Bush Pardons Bald Eagle 'Killer'

Sunday , November 30, 2008

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS —

Leslie Owen Collier was surrounded by cattle at a livestock auction when his cell phone rang. It was the White House.

Twelve years after pleading guilty to federal charges in the deaths of three bald eagles, Collier learned his name was cleared: He was pardoned by President George W. Bush.

"I guess I was humbled is the best way to say it — I never thought it would happen," Collier, 50, said in a phone interview this week. "It was emotional. I almost came to tears, really."

Collier was among 14 people pardoned by Bush on Monday. The president has granted just 171 pardons overall — less than half as many as the other most recent two-term presidents, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan.

The 1995 incident that changed the life of the farmer from the Charleston area of southeastern Missouri began when he noticed an increasing number of wild turkeys, which were believed to have died away. "I got it in my head that if I eliminated some of the coyotes it would give the turkeys a jump-start," on their comeback, Collier said.

So he put out hamburger meat laced with the pesticide Furadan in an effort to kill the coyotes. It worked; seven coyotes died.

The problem occurred when the eagles fed on the coyotes' carcasses. They died, too. So did a red-tailed hawk and a great horned owl, among other animals.

The birds are federally protected and killing them is illegal. Collier said the crime became a felony when the second eagle died. He pleaded guilty in late 1995 and received two years of probation.

While he didn't go to jail, the conviction was hard on Collier. He was ordered to pay \$10,000 in restitution. As a convicted felon, the longtime hunter had to give up his guns.

Beyond that, there were the occasional news articles and Web postings referring to Collier as the guy who killed bald eagles, America's national bird. Sometimes in town, he'd get looks that were difficult to ignore.

"For a while, you think people kind of look at you different," Collier said.

But many in and around Charleston, a town of about 5,000 residents, felt Collier was penalized too harshly because he clearly didn't intend to hurt the eagles. Among those in his corner was Lanie Black, then the state representative for the region, as well as a close family friend.

The men attend the same church, where Black teaches one of Collier's three children in Sunday School. When Collier lost part of a leg in a farming accident several years ago, Black was among those keeping vigil at the hospital.

To him, the prosecution of Collier never made sense.

"Everybody down here feels he was taken advantage of by a bunch of slick-tongued lawyers and prosecutors," Black said.

So Black and other supporters began writing letters seeking a pardon. Several months ago, U.S. Attorney Catherine Hanaway contacted Black and requested the full story. Hanaway had been asked by a pardon attorney for the Department of Justice for input about the possibility of a pardon.

ADVERTISEMENT

SOLUTIONS ARE POWER.™
 ONLINE MARKETING • SECURITY • WEB SITE DESIGN
 E-COMMERCE • DOMAINS & HOSTING

Network**Solutions**.com **GET YOUR SOLUTION >>**

Hanaway said she spoke with federal prosecutors familiar with the case, with the judge, even with people in the Charleston area who know Collier. "By all accounts ... he is a pillar of the community down there," she said.

Collier said he didn't hear anything else until Monday. He feels vindicated and relieved his name is cleared.

"What happened really was regretful," Collier said. "I'd always be really excited to see a bald eagle. It sure never entered into my head I might kill some."

SEARCH

GO

[Click here for FOX News RSS Feeds](#)

Advertise on FOX News Channel, FOXNews.com and FOX News Radio

[Jobs at FOX News Channel.](#)

[Internships At Fox News \(Summer Application Deadline is March 15, 2007\)](#)

[Terms of use.](#) [Privacy Statement.](#) For FOXNews.com comments write to foxnews@foxnews.com; For FOX News Channel comments write to comments@foxnews.com

© Associated Press. All rights reserved.

This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright 2008 FOX News Network, LLC. All rights reserved.

All market data delayed 20 minutes.