TRAFFIC

FACTSHEET

OCT 2026

CANOPY TO CABIN

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S GIBBON SMUGGLING BY AIR

ABOUT US

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COVER PHOTO:

A gibbon seized by Bengaluru Customs from a passenger on a flight from Bangkok, Thailand on 23 October 2026. © Bengaluru Customs

DESIGN

Haziq Salim

Xray image of a bag with Siamang and other wildlife seized by MCBA from a Malaysian national at KLIA on 28 July 2025. © Malaysia Border Control and Protection Agency (MCBA)

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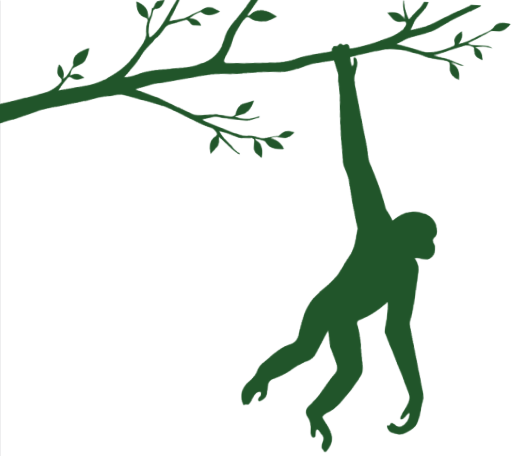


Gibbons have long been targeted by poachers and traffickers. Data shows that 336 gibbons were confiscated across South and Southeast Asia between January 2016 and August 2025 (Wong & Wong, 2025).

The role of the aviation sector in moving gibbons across borders has become increasingly apparent, perhaps more rampant, in recent years.

This analysis of seizures covering the most recent period from January 2024 – August 2026, provides compelling evidence of how the aviation sector is being exploited to smuggle gibbons internationally, with Southeast Asia serving as a critical hub linking wildlife supply chains to markets elsewhere in Asia.

Data were largely from open sources. These were supplemented, and in several cases, verified by governments. All are recorded in TRAFFIC's Wildlife Trade Information System (WiTIS). Findings should not be interpreted as absolute trafficking trends or volumes, as detected cases likely underestimate the true scale of illegal trade and trafficking.

The speed and connectivity of commercial air travel across the region have enabled wildlife to be moved rapidly between countries, making airports important intervention points for detecting and disrupting trafficking, while emphasizing the role of airlines in the fight against wildlife trafficking.

Boombox singers

their whooping loud, far-carrying songs can be heard from kilometres away, with many species performing complex duets.

INTRODUCTION

Known for their spectacular songs and remarkable agility, gibbons are small apes found across the forests of South and Southeast Asia, from northeastern India to Indonesia. All 20 recognised species face a high level of threat including habitat loss, hunting and, increasingly, the live animal trade. Growing demand for live animals, serving either the exotic pet trade or possible captive facilities, is adding pressure on wild gibbon populations.

The impact of this trade extends beyond the animals that are ultimately captured, trafficked or sold. Gibbons live in close-knit family groups, with young remaining with their parents for several years (Hu *et al*., 2018). When infants or juveniles are targeted, adults may be harmed or killed during their capture, meaning the removal of a single young gibbon can result in the loss of other members of its family group. Those that survive capture and become part of the trafficking chain, face further undue stress or suffer during trafficking. They are typically drugged before being stuffed into suitcases or packages and shipped off for days, either by road or air, without food or water. Many do not survive the journey (Raman, 2025).

Despite these protections, demand for gibbons as exotic pets continues to drive trafficking across borders, in contravention of national laws and international regulations.

NATIONAL PROTECTION

All gibbons species are protected under national wildlife laws across their range, although the level of protection varies between countries and species. National laws generally prohibit or regulate activities such as hunting, capture, possession, transport and trade, generally requiring legal authorisation for permitted activities (Rodriguez *et al., 2018*).

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

All gibbon species (family Hylobatidae) are listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Appendix I which strictly prohibits all international commercial trade in wild-caught specimens.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Southeast Asia's Gibbon Smuggling By Air (January 2024-Aug 2026)

86

Gibbons smuggled in checked-in luggage

33

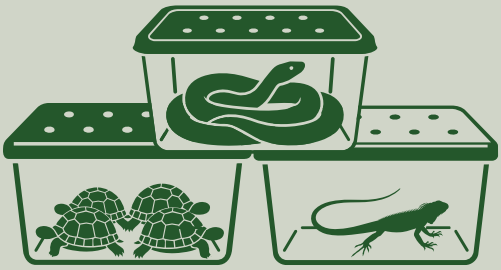
Seizure incidents at airports

6

Gibbons species

38

People arrested



265

Other wildlife confiscated alongside gibbons

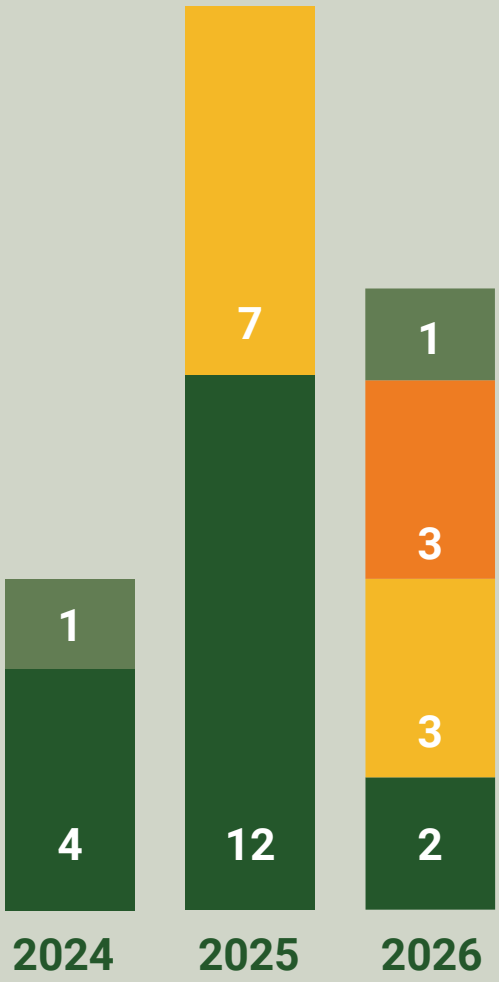
14

Airports implicated

9

Airlines implicated

Airport seizure incidents



India
Malaysia
Thailand
Indonesia

FIGURE 1

Annual seizure incidents of trafficked gibbons linked to Southeast Asia, made at airports from January 2024 to August 2026

FINDINGS

Between January 2024 and August 2026, 33 international smuggling incidents implicating Southeast Asia through airports were recorded, either as a source or transit. More than half of these shipments (55%, n=18) were intercepted by Indian customs authorities, across six Indian airports, with the gibbons reportedly arriving from Malaysia or Thailand. During the same period, Malaysia intercepted 10 incidents, and Thailand three, all involving gibbons destined for India. Indonesia intercepted two attempts, with Oman and Dubai reported as the destinations.

These seizures peaked in 2025, driven largely by interceptions in India (Figure 1). However, data from 2026 (January-August) showed a shift towards detections in Southeast Asia, where seizures were increasingly made particularly in Malaysia and Thailand before the gibbons reached their intended overseas destinations, suggesting earlier detection and intervention along the trafficking chain.

At least 14 airports (Figure 2) and nine airlines were implicated in the recorded incidents. Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) was the most frequently implicated airport, linked to 16 incidents involving at least 54 gibbons (Table 1). Of these, 10 incidents (32 gibbons) were seized at KLIA, four incidents (13 gibbons) identified the airport as the point of departure, and two other incidents (9 gibbons) identified it as a transit location.

Data were largely sourced from open records and assumed to be accurate. These were also supplemented and, in some cases, verified by governments. Findings should not be interpreted as absolute trafficking trends or volumes, as detected cases likely underestimate the true scale of illegal trade and trafficking.

TOP 5 MOST IMPLICATED AIRPORTS BY NUMBER OF INCIDENTS (AND GIBBONS)

	Role of Location / Airport	Origin Location	Transit Location	Destination Location	Discovery Location	Grand Total
Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur International Airport	4 (13)	2 (9)	–	10 (32)	16 (54)
Thailand	Suvarnabhumi International Airport	7 (15)	–	–	3 (4)	10 (19)
India	Chennai International Airport	–	–	1 (2)	6 (15)	7 (17)
India	Kempegowda International Airport	–	–	1 (4)	6 (14)	7 (18)
India	Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport	–	–	3 (7)	3 (9)	6 (16)

TABLE 1

Based on the number of times each airport was reported and linked to a trafficking incident, with the number of gibbons involved shown in brackets. Airports may be counted more than once across incidents because a single trafficking route involves multiple airports.

At Least
86 Gibbons Intercepted
at airports in **India**, **Malaysia**,**Thailand** and **Indonesia.**

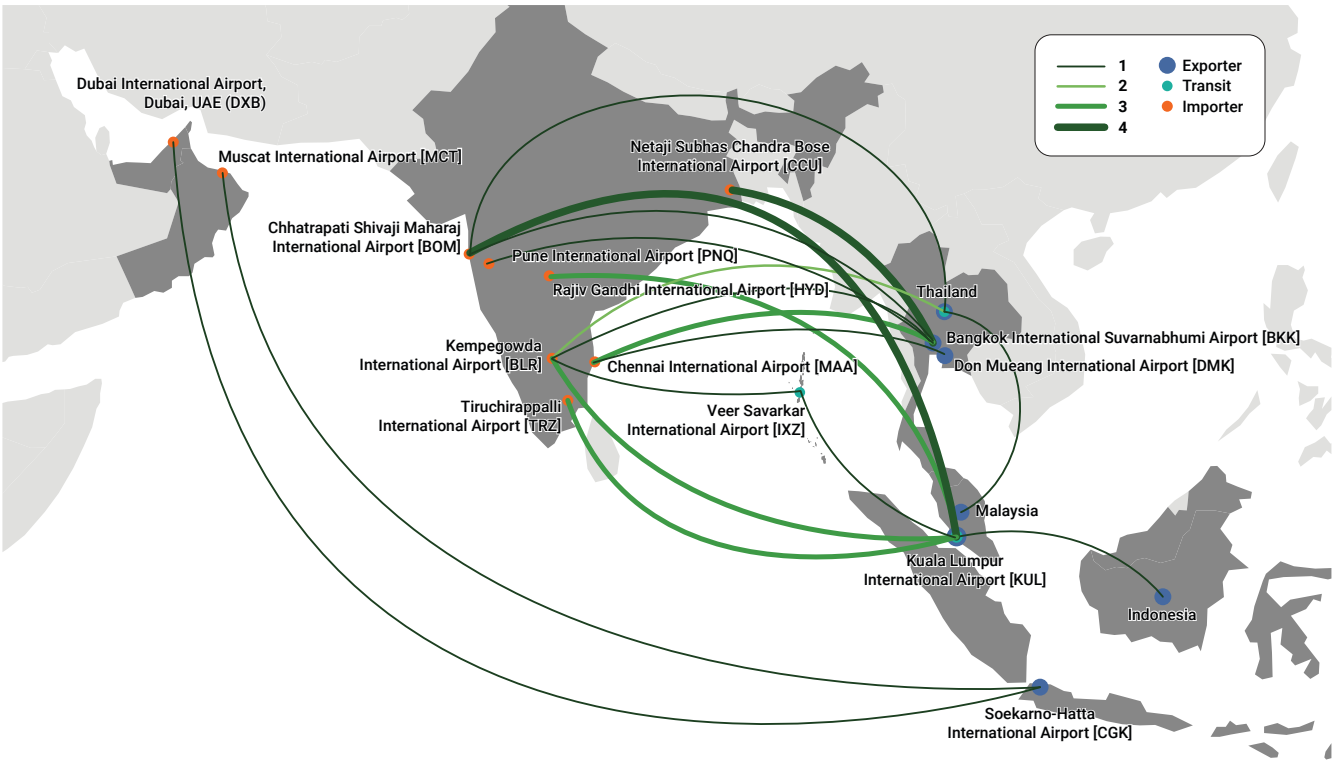
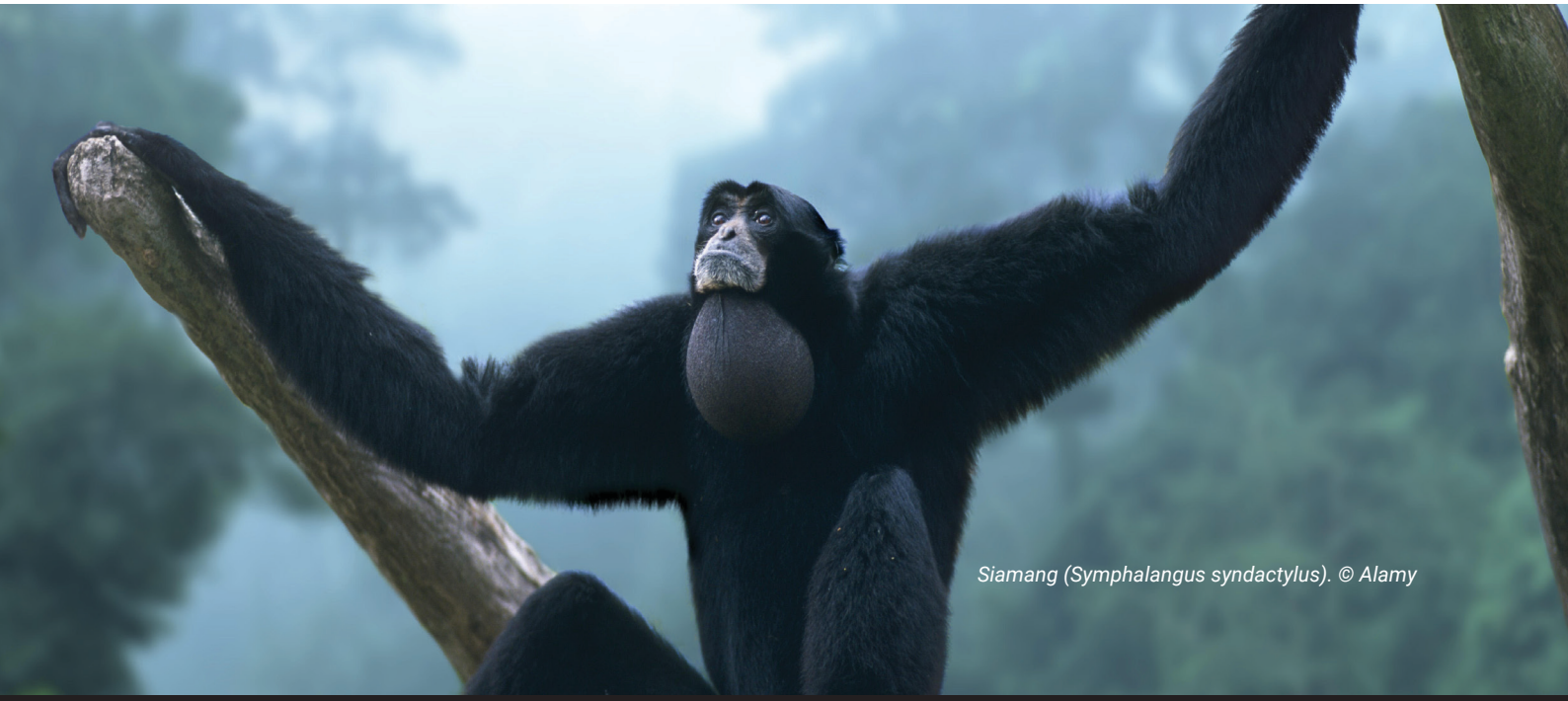


FIGURE 2

Trafficking routes of gibbons involving at least 14 airports implicating Southeast Asia from January 2024 to August 2026.

These airport cases show a clear pattern of gibbons being smuggled from Southeast Asia towards India and the Middle East. Where sufficient route information was available, airports in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Thailand and Malaysia were identified as transit points in at least three incidents.

Port Blair's Veer Savarkar Airport involvement is particularly notable because it is less frequently implicated in wildlife smuggling than larger airports in India. The arrest of two Singaporean brothers arriving from Kuala Lumpur with eight infant primates in February 2025 (TNIE, 2025a) may indicate attempts to exploit alternative routes into India. The case occurred only three months after the introduction of a new Singapore - Port Blair service via Kuala Lumpur, highlighting how traffickers may adapt to emerging aviation connections between Southeast Asia and India (AirAisa, 2024), perhaps also pointing to traffickers assessing interceptions and perceived levels of risk for trafficking.



Siamang (Symphalangus syndactylus). © Alamy

GIBBONS SEIZED

At least 86 gibbons were intercepted in just 32 months, with six species identified among the seizures. India accounted for more than half (54%; n=46) of all gibbons seized. Most of these seizures (n=42) occurred in 2024 and 2025, where they were not detected before they left Malaysia and Thailand.

About 64% of the cases involved the smuggling of between 2-4 gibbons per incident, pointing to targeted and consolidated effort of animals being caught and trafficked.

Siamangs (*Symphalangus syndactylus*) and Agile Gibbons (*Hylobates agilis*) were the most frequently reported (Figure 3). Both naturally occur in Indonesia (Sumatra), Peninsular Malaysia and Thailand, which were also prominent departure points for air trafficking. This overlap points to these countries functioning as source or consolidation locations for gibbons entering the international trade.

All gibbons of known life stage were infants or juveniles. Their small size and ease of handling makes them easier to carry and conceal during air travel.

Gibbon trafficking rarely occurred in isolation. Among the gibbons, at least 265 other individual wildlife were also seized. This include 18 other primates such as douc langurs, langurs and macaques. A larger proportion of this (54%; 22 species) involved animals smuggled out of Thailand, while another 46% (20 species) involved animals smuggled out of Malaysia. In all these cases, the wildlife were heading to India.

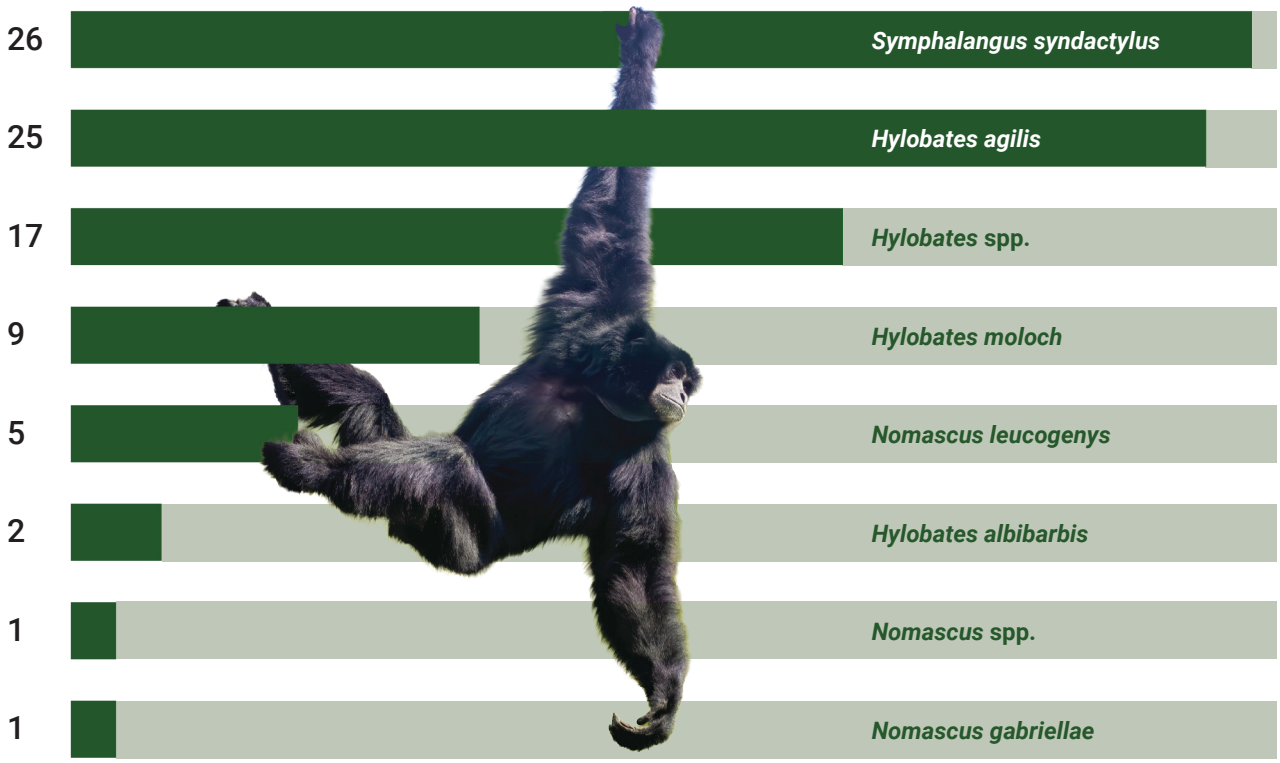


FIGURE 3
Gibbon species seized between January 2024 and August 2026

Siamang (Symphalangus syndactylus). © Rixie | Dreamstime.com

ROLE OF COUNTRIES

These small number of incidents of gibbon smuggling also show some interesting patterns that require further investigations and scrutiny. From this dataset, India appears to function primarily as a destination market for trafficked gibbons; Malaysia as a key source node in regional primate trafficking networks; while Thailand appears to be a major source and consolidation hub supplying a diverse range of live wildlife to international markets including those typically native from Latin America, Oceania, Asia and Africa.

One consideration for further scrutiny is that a series of visa and visa-fee waiver measures between Malaysia (Fragomen, 2026), Thailand (The Star, 2026) and India (High Commission of India, 2026) during 2024-2026 may have coincided with increased ease of travel and cross-border movement among these countries. These occurred within the same period as several gibbon trafficking incidents involving the route. While no relationship can be inferred, this temporal overlap may warrant further examination as part of a broader assessment of wildlife trafficking patterns and travel dynamics.

PEOPLE ARRESTED

At least 38 people were arrested in connection with these incidents, comprising Indian, Malaysian, Singaporean and Egyptian nationals. Over 55% involved Indian nationals while close to 30% were Malaysians. At least eight people were reported to have acted as couriers or “mules”, with several allegedly recruited through offers of cash, return air tickets including several on business class tickets and accommodation in exchange for transporting wildlife. In one case, authorities also detained an individual waiting outside the airport to receive the animals from an arriving courier (Times of India, 2024). There were also reports involving repeated interceptions and alleged links to organised trafficking networks suggesting that some couriers may have operated as part of wider, coordinated operations, with different individuals responsible for transporting, receiving and potentially distributing smuggled wildlife (TNIE, 2025b).

This gibbon was found alongside a pair of cuscus in the luggage of a Malaysian man caught at KLIA on 29 September 2025. © Elizabeth John | TRAFFIC

OTHER CASES LINKED TO AIR TRAFFICKING

Apart from airports, gibbons are often confiscated at other locations once the animals have already entered the country. In some of these cases they provide additional evidence on the role of aviation in facilitating international gibbon trafficking.

In July 2026, Thai authorities arrested two Indian nationals and seized a Pileated Gibbon (*Hylobates pileatus*) among hundreds of wildlife during a series of operations targeting a transnational wildlife trafficking network in rental houses in Bangkok. This stemmed from an investigation that was initiated after a shipment of wildlife were repatriated to Bangkok from India. Officers also found suitcases containing snacks alongside ventilated plastic containers, diapers, syringes, incubators and animal-care equipment typically used to conceal and traffic live animals, a method reported to be consistent with wildlife smuggling techniques previously detected at airports (DNP, 2026).

In February 2026, Indonesian authorities reported seizing three gibbons from a suspected wildlife trader in East Java, including a Javan Gibbon (*Hylobates moloch*), a Müller's Gibbon (*Hylobates muelleri*) and a Bornean White-bearded Gibbon (*Hylobates albibarbis*). Police alleged that the suspect had traded protected wildlife internationally since 2021, with links to markets in Thailand, India, Malaysia and Viet Nam and Europe identified as a final destination (detikJatim, 2026).

In September 2025, Indian authorities discovered two juvenile gibbons from a lodge in Mumbai. Days later, more gibbons were seized at a different location. Media reported that these cases linked to a gang based in Chennai, India that recruited couriers ("mules") to smuggle animals between Bangkok and India (TNIE, 2025).

In May 2025, Indian authorities found four Siamangs and three Agile Gibbons from a hotel in Mumbai after they had reportedly been flown from Malaysia concealed in suitcases. One Malaysian and one Indian national were detained. By the time the animals were discovered, all seven gibbons had died (Hindustan Times, 2025).

CONCLUSION

These cases reinforce the constant use of the aviation sector to traffic live animals. Intelligence-led investigations, collaboration between source, transit and consumer countries are crucial to break the chain between hunters, collectors, consolidators, transporters, mules, end consumers, and the kingpins running the show behind the scenes. Given the data presented here, collaboration is key between Malaysia, India, Thailand and Indonesia. Whether the gibbons are targeted for consumers as pets or heading to captive facilities must be investigated.

Airport and airlines need to strengthen efforts to address the problem by investing in the skills, capacities and resources to improve detection. In many cases, these gibbons were confiscated after they had reached their destinations. This should also include risk-based profiling and screening.

Only through collaboration across agencies and countries can this cross-regional crime be tackled.

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WORKING TO ENSURE THAT TRADE IN WILD SPECIES IS LEGAL AND SUSTAINABLE, FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE PLANET AND PEOPLE.

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