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Cockfighting charges cause a flap

Thirty-nine arrests prompt fears that the ancient blood sport is widespread in B.C.

ON the hobby farms that surround Vancouver, most people keep horses, rabbits or perhaps a coop filled with chickens as an escape from city life. Things, however, aren't always so peaceful.

Four days ago, the RCMP stumbled on to what it suspects is a gang of West Coast cockfighters. The 39 people arrested are believed to have been raising gamecocks, which are essentially wild roosters, and organizing cockfights. In these blood-soaked contests, birds are thrown into a ring and fight to the death as spectators gamble on what bird will emerge triumphant.

Vancouverites were shocked to

Miro Cernetig in Vancouver

hear police allegations that the brutal sport was taking place on a hobby farm in nearby Burnaby, on Vancouver's eastern boundary. But police and experts say they have long heard rumours that cockfighting was going on in British Columbia and they believe the illegal activity is widespread.

"We've had lots of anonymous tips over the years," said Carson Wilson, a spokesman for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "But we've never really been able to track any of them down."

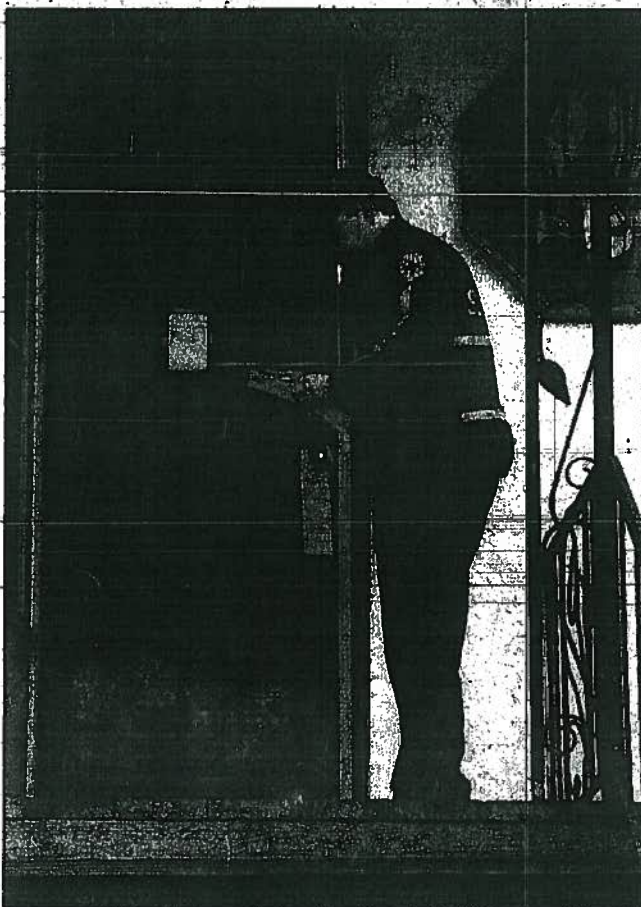
The RCMP, in fact, stumbled onto the weekend's alleged cockfights by accident. They had been called to the front of the farm by neighbours after two men were fighting in the street. They quickly discovered dozens of people, most of them immigrants from the Philippines, where cockfighting is a big sport, at the back of the farm around a ring where the RCMP believes the fighting took place.

Seventy-two prize gamecocks, which can sell for hundreds of dollars each, were put down by the SPCA, as required by law. It was the biggest such raid in B.C. history.

"When you get 39 people arrested for cockfighting in one place, it's safe to say there's more of this going on," Mr. Wilson said. "I'd be inclined to think this is not an isolated case. There have to be more of these cockfights taking place."

One of the West Coast's experts on cockfighting is much more prevalent in British Columbia than people think.

"I would honestly say that you've got a couple of dozen cockfights of various sizes going on every weekend," said Diane Jessup, an animal-control officer in Washington State, where there have been problems with cockfighting. "And you are probably going to see more of it as you get more Asian immigration. Cockfighting is a very popular sport in places like the Philippines and many immigrants bring it with



SPCA inspector Peter Westcott goes door-to-door to investigate allegations of cockfighting in the Burnaby area. (The Globe and Mail)

The history

Cockfighting was popular in ancient times in India, Persia and other eastern countries and was introduced into Greece around 600 BC. The sport then spread throughout Asia Minor and Sicily.

For a long time the Romans affected to despise the "Greek diversion" but ended by adopting it with enthusiasm.

From Rome the sport spread northward and, although it was opposed by the Christian clergy, it became popular in the low countries, Italy, Spain and its colonies and throughout England.

Cockfighting pits were circular with a matted stage about six metres in diameter and surrounded by a barrier to keep the birds from falling off. The "mains," or contests, usually consisted of fights between an agreed number of pairs of birds, the majority of victories deciding the main.

Two other types of contest particularly aroused the anger of moralists. These were the battle royal, in which a number of birds were placed in a pit in a free-for-all

that continued until only one bird was left standing, and the Welsh main, in which eight pairs were matched in what was literally a sudden-death competition — the winners of each pair going on to the next round.

Cockfighting was banned in Britain in 1849. It is prohibited by law in Canada and in most U.S. states. It is expressly forbidden or repressed by general laws against cruelty to animals.

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

What the law says

Cockfighting in section 447:

(1) Every one who builds, makes, maintains or keeps a cockpit on premises that he owns or occupies, or allows a cockpit to be built, made, maintained or kept on such premises is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction.

(2) A peace officer who finds cocks in a cockpit or on premises where a cockpit is located shall seize them and take them before a justice who shall order them to be destroyed.

them.

"But you're not going to stumble across these fights. These people know what they're doing. And they want to keep it a secret."

To those who relish it, cockfighting is viewed as a noble pursuit that is poorly understood by the rest of the world. In *Defence of Cockfighting*, a book on the subject by Nid Anima, describes a cockfight in Hemingwayesque terms:

"It happens in the air, it's a spasm in space... It was a release from Earth whenever those cocks jetted upward and collided and fused fatally and, with blood spurted out, perished in space — and signed the white air vivid with their honour."

Since most people — and the Criminal Code — take the view that cockfighting is cruel, most of those arrested in the latest B.C. incident are keeping a low profile. But Mauricio Laurel, who was living on the farm and has been charged with cockfighting, has argued that he and his friends were simply raising the gamecocks so they could be sent back to the Philippines, where the sport is legal.

"There never was a cockfight and we can prove that," said Mr. Laurel. "The SPCA didn't even find a dead chicken. They are going to be responsible for those dead cocks."

At the farm, however, police and SPCA officials say they discovered some of the paraphernalia usually associated with cockfighting. There were the long metal blades, or spurs, that are attached to a bird's feet so they can slash at other birds. Syringes and vials of drugs were also confiscated and are now being analyzed.

Ms. Jessup said convicted cockfighters usually have such equipment near their fights. The syringes are used to inject birds with vitamin K, which acts as a coagulant that can stop a bird from bleeding to death when it is stabbed by the spurs, which are sold under names like the Piranha and Scorpion. Strychnine is also used as a stimulant, causing a bird to fight in a frenzy and ignore injuries.

"These birds can get stabbed in the lungs and intestines repeatedly, and they're so hopped up on drugs they continue to fight and win," she said.

With what police believe to be a way to justice, SPCA officials are wondering if an even uglier illegal sport is also taking place in the Vancouver area: pit-bull fighting. Dogs in the area are often stolen, which police have suspected might be related to illegal dog-fighting rings. Suddenly that prospect seems much more plausible.

"It's probably happening. Dog fighters are the scum of the earth," said Ms. Jessup. "Even chicken fighters look down on dog fighters."

Miro Cernetig is Vancouver bureau chief for The Globe and Mail.

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